COMPUTERS/HILLEL SEGAL

Big 'Genius' monitor not so bright

It sounds so simple. Turn a monitor on its side so that it displays a full page of print and allows the operator to work with full 8½-inch by 11-inch pages at a time.

People rearranging blocks of text or diagrams on a page can see exactly what the end result will look like on their screen, prior to printing it out. Most normal screens display only 24 or so lines of print compared with the 66 available on a 8½-inch by 11-inch sheet of paper.

Some of the dedicated word-processing companies have been offering such monitors for years. But only recently have large screens become available for IBM PCs, PC-compatible personal computers and Apple Macintosh units.

I was intrigued by the concept, so I ordered a unit for review from a small company called Micro Display Systems Inc. of Hastings, Minn. The major monitor manufacturers are apparently letting the small innovative companies experiment in the marketplace before they jump in — IBM's classic strategy — and Micro Display Systems has become one of the forerunners with a monitor called "The Genius."

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Unfortunately, as good as it sounds in theory, the unit performed poorly in practice. After replacing my PC's normal-size color monitor with the new larger one, and running Word Perfect and my other business and accounting software with the new display, I discovered:

✔ The large-screen monitor was harder to read than IBM's own monochrome or color monitors, and especially poor in comparison with the beautiful color EGA (Enhanced Graphics Adapter) displays that have recently fallen in price. The Genius monitor is in black and white only, and the characters are much smaller and more difficult to see than on a normal green-on-black or amber-on-black screen.

✔ While it displayed a full page vertically, it still had the same number of characters displayed from left to right as a normal screen, and this prevents multicolumn text that exceeds 80 characters across from being fully displayed on the screen. An 8½-inch wide page printing at 12 characters an inch typically has the capability of printing 100 characters across. The limitation to 80 characters was a big disappointment, because it counters one of the main purposes of purchasing the monitor — to view a full page at a time.

✔ It only runs in the full-page mode with specific software, and all other programs run all scrunched-up in the top third of the screen only. So in business offices that use a variety of software, it will work with some programs and not with others. In my case, it worked with my favorite word processing program, Word Perfect, but with none of the many business programs I use regularly. For the others, it was not "a little inconvenient," but very inferior to a normal screen.

Finally, the price is out of sight: $1,256.50. This compares with about $300 for an easier-to-read IBM monochrome monitor, or EGA board and monitor combinations from other manufacturers for less than $1,000.

The bottom line: The Genius' many limitations and high price make it a poor buy at this time, even for business applications that would seemingly benefit from its use. In the future, I'll compare it with similar models from other manufacturers to see if they've been more successful in overcoming the problems.

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